

# False Prophets: Who are They?



**Thrust Statement:** Paul appeals for unity in diversity among Christians.

**Scripture Reading:** Romans 14 and 15; I Corinthians 8.

## UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Part two of this series is not dealing specifically with one of the seven occurrences of the term *false prophets* as employed in the New Testament. This essay focuses on two chapters in the **Book of Romans** and one chapter in the **Book of First Corinthians** in order to set the stage for a correct understanding of the subject of false prophets within the Christian community. These three chapters are pivotal to one's concept of unity in diversity, not unity in conformity, within the company of the redeemed. An understanding of these three chapters should assist one in identifying accurately the use of the term, or phrase, that is so loosely employed by many sincere Christians that is not biblical. It is significant that in **Romans 14 and 15** that Paul does not indict believers as dishonorable interpreters or as false teachers for their lack of clear perception concerning the eating of meats and the keeping of certain holy days to the Lord. Even in the Corinthian Letter, Paul did not castigate the Corinthians for their not fully grasping the utter futility of idols (**1 Corinthians 8**).<sup>[1]</sup>

The Corinthians were one because they believed in Jesus. They believed the Gospel facts—Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (**1 Corinthians 15:1-8**). Their salvation was not contingent upon the acuteness of the human intellect or the logical powers of the mind to sort out all the problems encountered in their acceptance of Jesus as the Way of salvation. Yes, it was belief of and response to historical facts about Jesus that resulted in salvation by grace through faith, not adherence to opinions reliant upon the sharpness of one's human brainpower. Christianity is founded upon three leading facts: (1) Jesus Christ was crucified upon Mount Calvary, (2) His body was deposited in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and (3) He did actually rise from the dead on the third day. Christianity does not consist in matters of opinions, but upon facts.

## First Corinthians 8

If one professes Christianity, but, at the same time, does not understand that there is only one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ (**1 Corinthians 8:4-6**), one wonders

how the Christian community today would have reacted to his or her lack of understanding in the first century. Would the church today have accepted such individuals into the fellowship of the local congregation? Would today's fellowship of Christians have accused these individuals of being false teachers or false prophets? How did Paul react to this lack of comprehension about God? Just a casual reading of **First Corinthians 8** reveals that many did not fully grasp the belief that there is just one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ. Did Paul point the finger at them and lay the epithet of "false prophets" on them for their deficiency of discernment? How does one stack this unpleasant mix-up about doctrine in Corinth with the many questions that carve up God's people into so many warring factions today?

Some of the Corinthians understood correctly, but, on the other hand, some believers still did not recognize accurately the identity of God. How did Paul deal with such absence in knowledge? He begins this chapter by admitting: "we all possess knowledge" (8:1b). Is correct understanding the most important issue in the life of the believer? What happens when one person's knowledge exceeds that of another? What is the most worthy characteristic that exemplifies one's favor with God? Is it knowledge or is it love? Paul goes right to the heart of what Christian fellowship is all about: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1c). Do you say, "I know that I am right?" Is fellowship based upon a relationship with Jesus through faith or is fellowship based upon perfection in knowledge? Listen to Paul once more as he seeks to set the record straight: "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" (8:2). Regarding this same concept, Carl Ketcherside writes with justification:

Those who were in Christ in the days of the apostles were in error on many points. They were mistaken about a lot of things but they were not charged with "preaching another gospel." Freedom from error is not a condition of salvation else all men would be damned. We are not saved by attainment to a certain degree of knowledge but by faith in Christ Jesus. It is by belief of facts related to him, and not by grasp of abstract truth, that we are justified before God. Certainly it is not by performance of meritorious deeds nor by legalistic conformity. When we postulate a program of justification by knowledge we hang ourselves on the gallows we have constructed to rid ourselves of others, unless we are prepared to make ourselves even more ridiculous by affirming that we know as much as God.<sup>[2]</sup>

Do you know everything you ought to know? What is God concerned about? Again, Paul, through the Holy Spirit, plunges headlong into the very heart of what matters with God: "But the man who loves God is known by God" (8:3). If a person loves God, God loves this person in spite of his or her lack of perfection in knowledge. Paul now argues that it is true that there is only one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ, but, at the same time, he stresses that not everyone knows this (8:7). How did Paul behave in response to those who were correct in their thinking? He says: "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak (8:9). Are you following the example of Paul in this matter? Paul, as he seeks to summarize the attitude of toleration, cuts away all underbrush about one's own path:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.<sup>32</sup> Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of

God—<sup>33</sup> even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. <sup>1</sup> Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ (10:31-33).

Paul exercised the spirit of open-mindedness for shortage of knowledge within the fellowship of God's new community. He followed the example of Christ. Do you follow the pattern of Christ? What did Christ do? Paul describes Christ's spirit of liberality and generosity in the Roman Letter. One can hardly read this statement of Paul in **1 Corinthians 10:31-33** without reflection upon his conclusion to **chapter fourteen in Romans**:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. <sup>3</sup> For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."<sup>c</sup> <sup>4</sup> For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup> May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (Romans 15:1-7).

### **Romans 14 and 15**

False teachers are not by definition those whose knowledge is inadequate. To require that one have perfect knowledge of every detail of God's Word in order to be a trustworthy teacher is to insist on inerrancy and infallibility, an impossible task, even for the most highly trained in the field of biblical interpretation. To expect such an accomplishment is to demand that one be God. **Romans 14** is a chapter on how to maintain unity in diversity. There will always be differences within the Christian community; therefore, believers ought not to denounce one another as dishonest guides when they do not dot every "i" or cross every "t" in the same way.

Christians can no more all think alike than they can all look alike. God has never made absolute perfection in knowledge a condition of salvation; otherwise, no one could be saved. On the other hand, one can also say that absolute freedom from error is not a condition of salvation either; otherwise, no one could be saved. Christians are one because God has reconciled humanity unto Himself in and through Jesus, not through intellectual attainment. Toleration for differences of opinions is the subject of **Romans 14 and 15**, not absolute conformity in belief with other believers, whether right or wrong.

Within the natural realm as well as the spiritual realm, one recognizes that there are infants, children, young men, and fathers in both domains, and, as a result of these separations, misinterpretations exist in one's endeavor to understand God's Word more perfectly. This diversity resides in both worlds—secular and spiritual—because of the discrepancy of age, the degree of education, cultural background (physical and spiritual), and many other factors. And, as a result of this individuality in perception, distinctions in sharpness are unavoidable.<sup>[3]</sup>

Is misapprehension of God's Word defiance against God? No! Misunderstanding of

God's Word is not rebellion; an honest mistake of the heart is not mutiny. There is distinctiveness between a guileless infraction of the heart and uprising against God. It is not right to castigate (haul over the coals) someone just because one thinks that his or her knowledge is more accurate or more developed than someone else's knowledge. One should never exclude another human being from fellowship because of a condition of mental deficiency, or feeble-mindedness, that is to say, one who does not assent to the opinion of the disputing person. Christians are not divided over the essentials—Gospel facts—but rather they are on bad terms over issues they have inherited from traditions. Christians should practice unity in diversity as advanced by Paul in his admonition to the believers in Rome and Corinth.

In **Romans, chapter 14**, Paul develops the concept of unity in diversity and forcefully concludes with the following counsel:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (15:1-7).<sup>[4]</sup>

Who are the strong? Who are the weak? Were the weak false teachers? Were the strong true teachers? Does inaccuracy in doctrine automatically make one a corruptible teacher? Does it not all depend on what the teaching is? Were some wrong in their sensitivity about the keeping of certain days holy to the Lord or the legality of eating certain meats? Were some correct in their views while others were mistaken in their views? What does fellowship mean? What does endorsement mean?

Can one be in fellowship with another person and not necessarily subscribe to the totality of what the other person believes? Are individuals in fellowship with persons or things? Which? Should one equate fellowship and endorsement as one and the same? For example, do you consider yourself in fellowship with God? If so, do you maintain that God endorses everything you believe or do? Who would be so foolish as to make such a claim? If one can be in fellowship with God without God endorsing everything one believes or does, can one not be in fellowship with other believers without endorsing everything the other believes?

What does it mean to exercise "a spirit of unity"? What does it mean to glorify God "with one heart and mouth"? What does it mean to "accept one another . . . just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God"? How does God accept you? Does he not approve of you with warts and all? Should not Christians take in other believers with warts and all? Has God received you with imperfection in your knowledge and famine in your daily living? Are Christians to receive others with shortage in their knowledge and fallibility in their daily living? These are questions that every sincere believer must address. The Holy Spirit nails the coffin shut about these issues: "Accept

one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (**Romans 15:7**).

Again, from the Scriptures, one determines that a false prophet is not automatically someone who has deficiency in understanding. But the question that still confronts every Christian is: How does one settle from Scripture who is or who is not a spurious prophet/teacher?<sup>[5]</sup> What meaning should one attach to the various Scriptures that speak of false prophets? The first step in explaining Scripture is to read the text. To fathom a passage involves the immediate context, the remote context, and the larger context. The *immediate context* includes verses preceding and following the reference that one is studying. On the other hand, the *remote context* may take in the entire book in which the text is found. Also, the *larger context* may embrace the whole of God’s written revelation. This understanding of contexts helps to determine the meaning or meanings that one attaches to any distinct phrase. Otherwise, the interpreter may impose conjectured convictions on a text without due reflection upon what the author says. Without a conception of context, a person’s particular context tends to shape his or her understanding and interpretation of the message.

### WHO IS A FALSE PROPHET?

The first part of this essay analyzed **First Corinthians 8** and **Romans 14** in order to determine how Paul dealt with differences within the various congregations. These conflicts did not discuss the philosophy of those who sought to undermine the very foundation of Christianity, namely, Jesus as the Messiah, such as **First John 4:1-3**. When one denies that Jesus is the Christ, one is denying the very foundation on which Christianity stands (**2 John 7-11**). John goes right to the jugular vein in dealing with false teachers. In fact, he pinpoints, without equivocation, the error of false teachers:

I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also (**1 John 2:21-23**).

John calls attention to the errors of the false teachers, but, on the other hand, it is significant that Paul did not accuse those individuals who were wrong in Corinth (**1 Corinthians, chapter 8**) and Rome (**Romans, chapters 14 and 15**) as being false teachers, for he called them brothers. As one returns once more to John, one soon discovers that John continues to develop the identification of false teachers in his Second Epistle. In his Second Epistle he deals with Gnostic teaching that denied that Jesus came in the flesh; he does not discuss unity in diversity over peripherals (non-essentials) as Paul did in **Romans** and **First Corinthians**. Consider John’s warning:

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this



teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work (**2 John 7-11**).

## CONCLUSION

Who is the false teacher? Who is the deceiver? Who is the antichrist? John says that the deceivers, the antichrists, are those “who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (**2 John 7**). It is at this point that John issues a strong admonition to not receive anyone who “comes to you and does not bring this teaching” (**v.10**). Just as John did not contemplate the issues that Paul discussed in **First Corinthians 8** and **Romans 14 and 15**, neither did Jude, our Lord’s brother, write about these issues in his discourse on false teachers. Paul, in dealing with unity in diversity, did not approach the works of the flesh addressed in the book of Jude concerning false teachers. On the other hand, neither did Jude deal with unity in diversity, but rather, with a denial of God’s Word in the lives of men and women and a denial of Jesus as Lord. Think about the words of Jude:

For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (**Jude 4**).

Paul also warned again *false teachers*, even as John, Jude, and Peter. But, one should not apply the phrase *false teacher* to one who is contending for the faith (Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection) once delivered to the saints, as recorded by Jude (**Jude 3**). Paul did not so employ the term (false teacher/prophet) in his discussion of diversity within the Corinthian and Roman congregations, as noted above. These difficulties in Corinth and Rome, in and of themselves, did not deny the Messiahship of Jesus, did not deny that Jesus had come in the flesh, and did not reject the principles of morality upon God’s people. One who denies that Jesus is the Christ, one who denies the incarnation of Christ, and one who turns the grace of God into a license for sexual immorality—this one is a false teacher. Are you following the example of Christ and Paul in your relationship with other believers who do not know as much as you know?

Again, the question that confronts every believer is: False Prophets: Who Are They? How do you respond to this question? Do you still answer this question based upon whether or not one agrees or disagrees with your brand of orthodoxy? The following lengthy quote from Alexander Campbell’s (1788-1866) writings should help one to see the fallacy of making salvation contingent upon absolute perfection in knowledge a condition of salvation:

## Diversity in Knowledge

Amongst Christians there is now, as there was at the beginning, a very great diversity in the knowledge of the Christian institution. There are babes, children, young men, and fathers in Christ now, as well as in the days of the Apostle John. This, from the natural gifts of God, from the diversities of age, education, and circumstances, is unavoidable. And would it not be just as rational and as scriptural to excommunicate one another, because our knowledge is less or

greater than any fixed measure, as for differences of opinion or matters of speculation?

Indeed, in most cases where proscription<sup>[6]</sup> and exclusions now occur in this country, the excluded are the most intelligent members of the society; and although no community will accuse a man because he knows more of his Bible than his brethren, and on this account exclude him from their communion; yet this, it is manifest, rather than heresy, (of which, however, for consistency's sake, he must be accused,) is, in truth, the real cause of separation.

If God has bestowed better gifts or better opportunities on one man than another, by which he has attained more knowledge, instead of thanking God for his kindness to the community, they beg God to take him away; and if he will not be so unkind, they will at length put him from among them under the charge of heresy. In most instances the greatest error of which a brother can be guilty, is to study his Bible more than his companions—or, at least, to surpass them in his knowledge of the mystery of Christ.<sup>[7]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Churches of Christ do not generally follow this advice of Paul to the Corinthians as a whole. For example, in the earlier part of this author's ministry, he was associated with the one-cup and non-Sunday school movement. This writer sought to stay within this fellowship, but to no avail. For one to remain in this particular alliance and to enjoy participation as a faithful member, one had to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that one would go to hell for using individual communion cups and for sharing in Sunday school. Correct worship was not sufficient for salvation; one also had to know that the use of cups and Sunday school were sinful. But, on the other hand, this author soon discovered that the same mindset existed among the cups and Sunday school churches. This group (cups and Sunday school) also took a strong position against instrumental music. But this fellowship was/is as dogmatic about one's views concerning instrumental music as were the one-cup and non-Sunday school party against Sunday school and individual communion cups. It is not sufficient, according to some, to worship without the instrument, one must also know that singing acapella is the only way to please God; otherwise, there is no fellowship with God. Fellowship, among many churches, is generally based upon one's correct understanding of whatever the party line advocates, nothing else is tolerated.

<sup>[2]</sup> Carl Ketcherside, "Another Gospel," *Mission Messenger* 27, no 1 (January 1965): 6-7.

c Psalm 69:9

<sup>[3]</sup> This author observes, at least within many Churches of Christ, that the greatest blunder that a brother or sister can be guilty of, is to study his Bible more than his or her associates, or at least to outshine them in the knowledge of the Word. Instead of thanking God for allowing such persons into their midst, they usually plead with God to take them away. And, if God will not be so kind as to remove him or her out of the church, the so-called correct thinkers will at length disfellowship the inexact in understanding under

the charge of heresy.

[4] All Scripture citations are from the New International Version, unless stated otherwise.

[5] Simply reciting Scriptures that draw attention to “false teachers” is not sufficient to determine who the “false teachers” are. One such example of this perception of Scripture citation is by Allen Bailey, one cup and non-Sunday school preacher, a man who loves the Lord. In one essay, he cites thirty-six Scriptures to document the importance of this subject—and it is an important subject. No one denies these passages, but some deny his conclusions. Every Scripture he recalls is the Word of God, but one must not equate his interpretation with the Word itself. Remember that the context is the determining factor in trying to arrive at a correct insight. One must not employ these Scriptures in a way the Holy Spirit did not employ them. It is not Bailey’s intention to misrepresent the Word of God, but, it appears, so it seems to this author, that he has not carefully viewed the kind of errors or behavior addressed in the verses cited. In this article, he writes about “False Doctrines of the Twentieth Century.” After one’s reading, one cannot but stand in awe at many of his conclusions. See Allen Bailey, “False Teachers,” in *Preachers’ Study Notes: 1994 Preachers’ Study* (Buffalo, Missouri: Christian’s Expositor Publications, 1996).

[6] Proscription: An imposed restraint or restriction—PROHIBITION

[7] Alexander Campbell, “To Mr. William Jones, of London, Letter IV,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 3 (March 1835): 112.